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ABSTRACT

The Douglas Mawson Institute (DMI) of TAFE (technical and further education), which operates more than four campuses in Australia with a diverse student body numbering approximately 17,000 (78 percent studying part-time), has initiated strategies to support the transformation to an e-learning organization. Major elements in the change model are research and development of new learning technologies; institute-wide professional development; technology infrastructure; and partnerships. The project began with giving a group of 36 managers at DMI the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in online learning, as an adjunct to the other strategies that are being implemented across the institute to support the change to an e-learning organization. During the project, obstacles were tackled by attempting to make it fun through an "expedition" approach, but half of those who started were lost to "lack of time," "other priorities," and "loss of motivation." Still, some of the managers learned to use an online forum, conducted informal and formal online chats with each other, gained competence in using the World Wide Web platform for online learning, and increased their awareness of the Internet and browser use, online training options, and online student management. The project concluded that the project was effective as an example of participatory research and in teaching managers how to implement online courses, but that more support and technical expertise is needed and that team size should be reduced. (KC)

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ED 456 318

Managing the transformation to an e-learning organisation

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Douglas Mawson Institute (DMI) operates over four campuses; has a diverse student body numbering approximately 17,000, with 78% studying part-time; and is named after a famous South Australian explorer. Like its namesake, the Institute has a vision of leading and developing new frontiers in educational delivery through innovation, design and technology. To implement the vision, the Institute leadership team has initiated strategies to support the transformation to an e-learning organisation. Major elements in the change model are:

- Research and development of new learning technologies;
- Institute-wide professional development;
- New technology infrastructure; and
- Partnerships.

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Practitioners as researchers

'Managers leading through learning' was a work-based learning project funded by LearnScope in 2000 that provided a group of 36 managers at DMI with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in online learning, as an adjunct to the other strategies that are being implemented across the Institute to support the change to an e-learning organisation. The managers' project team was involved in work-based research and used their findings from the project to influence the strategic planning at both work group and institute level. My role in the project was project manager and co-facilitator, and so I, too, was a practitioner as researcher, focusing on the work-based learning model as a change agent.

Like any new skill being learnt, 'Leading through learning' presented the managers at Douglas Mawson Institute with as many challenges as opportunities. It really was and continues to be a 'work in progress'!

Work-based learning as a change agent

Extensive research has made it clear that learning occurs most effectively when learners can take responsibility for their learning. This means that individuals decide for themselves what to learn, why, where and how. Victoria Marsick, a leading researcher into the issues of work-based learning (WBL) and editor of the pioneering 1987 volume, *Learning in the workplace*, has this definition:

> WBL is frequently self-directed and self-monitored. It can be conscious, through trial-and-error, apprentice-like observation of more experienced individuals or imitation of role models. Or it can be less conscious, such as the process by which individuals become socialised into conforming ...

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In 'Managers leading through learning', the individuals were able to select their own online course from a suite of options. They were then asked to operate independently to simulate student conditions for learning in the online model as we know it. The group met fortnightly for Managers Forums and the project was not always an agenda item. Outside of these regular meeting times, the large group was divided into smaller units to discuss the learning that was happening whilst completing the online experience.

> Most people are better at taking on and doing tasks, than they are at thinking about what they've done and learning from the experience (Australian National Training Authority: *Workbased learning: a ready reference*)

Climbing mountains or tunnelling through to the other side!

Now that the LearnScope journey is finished for the DMI managers, it is possible to look back and evaluate the groundbreaking expedition. This was the first time that this group of managers had been asked to participate in a WBL project. They had little experience in functioning as a team, or tackling a team-based professional development activity. At the outset of the project, very few of them used more than email in their daily work.

At the outset of the project, there were mixed reactions to the idea of having hands-on experience in online learning. Some of the reasons for this were:

- Lack of experience or confidence in using computers
- Caution about methodologies they regard as unproven
- Belief that technology-based applications were not relevant to content specifics
- Belief that the online environment does not suit some students – their students don't want technology-based courses (or don't have resources to take up these options)
- Belief that computer-based options threaten human interaction – there is a high value placed on face-to-face learning
- Belief that the investment required to develop the online environment is not cost-effective
- Preoccupation with other priorities.

What did we do to get the managers interested in 'having a go' in the online environment?

The journey into the new frontier of Online Learning began with a small group of keen adventurers: Pene Davey, Institute Director for Educational Development; Janet Simpson, Professional Development Officer; and Barbara Whyte, Student Services

Officer. The initial discussions revolved around the merits of involving all managers – a daunting 35 people – or offering the opportunity to participate on a voluntary basis. Because we wanted to maximise the chance of creating an attitude shift to flexible learning as the DMI foundation of educational methodology and to embed the learning into strategic planning, the group opted to work with the whole managing team.

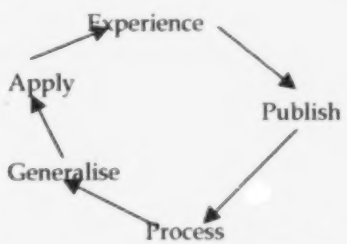
At this time, two managers exercised their option to opt out of the project. To enthuse the participants, we incited our namesake - Douglas Mawson, intrepid explorer - and used the expedition analogy to build interest and fun into the project: 'The adventurous spirit of Douglas Mawson was being rekindled in the learning journey of its managers'.

A WBL project provides opportunities for diversity, flexibility and customisation according to participants' needs. With 36 participants this was essential, and so the WBL model seemed an ideal vehicle to facilitate change. However, at this point the initiating team was committed to the work-based project, while the larger group was questioning its relevance to its roles and responsibilities.

Gathering supplies and getting the expedition ready

This was an idle time for the participants, as the expedition was not yet underway! We lost momentum as we tried to track down online modules that met the needs of the participants (ie relevant professionally to the participants). Not much WBL happening yet!

At our next Combined Expedition Gathering, the participants were given a list of courses to select from, and experienced mounting frustration because they couldn't enrol immediately online. There was an expectation that online meant learning right now and just for me!
The WBL model was introduced as an Experiential Learning Cycle –



and what this meant in relation to the way they would operate during the life of the project. For WBL to act as a change agent, participants must be given the opportunities to reflect on experiences – therein lies the key! The team learning plan was circulated for comment … not much response! Again, this emphasises the point that individuals in the workplace see a task function as their primary roles … any learning is implicit or incidental.

Thus, the effect on the impact of WBL as a change agent is related to the extent that a WBL facilitator is able to draw out the learning as part of the task.

Icebound

The sleds were loaded and the huskies hitched! But where were the explorers? The next step in the WBL project was to get the participants learning in the online environment, but they found themselves confronted by the very real barriers of technology glitches, enrolment procedures and other work commitments. Mid-semester break compounded a lethargy by the managers' team to move forward - it was almost as though we had reached high altitude and many members of the team were experiencing altitude sickness.

Starting again

In a desperate bid to regain the participation of the team members, both LearnScope facilitators embraced the Mawson 'Spirit of Adventure' and relaunched the 'Managers leading through learning' project using the Expedition theme to fire up managers' imaginations and renew their commitment to learning and experiencing new frontiers in educational delivery.

Each participant received a Survival Kit for the Expedition.

Participants were reorganised into Base Camps with Base Leaders, to increase the degree of support in their journey. They recorded each other's names in the smaller learning circles and each small group negotiated extra meeting times to discuss their learning experiences. By meeting more regularly and more intimately, it allowed for more sustainable and valuable interaction between managers in relation to their learning experiences. The group had been too large to sustain momentum.

This is a very important key to using WBL as a learning model to bring about any workplace change. The groups must be between 8-14 participants. Any larger and there is a loss of motivation due to lack of personal commitment and relevance.

Crevices and other dangers

By the end of the expedition, we had lost half of our trekkers to such dangers as 'No time', 'Other priorities', 'Can't see the reason for doing this', Lost motivation', 'Not enough help', and 'Aloneness'. Interestingly, the remaining participants began to tackle the key issues surrounding the managing of change to online learning. We invited a guest speaker along to talk to us about what is happening state-wide in Flexible Learning/Delivery and the discussion was lively and very positive. We then headed off into a computer room to post our experiences and reflections onto the Bulletin Board of the Managers' Communication Hub. This was enjoyed by all of the participants and once again reinforces what we know about how people like to learn ... in conjunction with others! We linked up with an ANTA fellow, Chris Horton, in a chat session on 3 November, and he answered questions about how Wodonga Institute is managing the change to online learning. Not surprisingly there were many similarities between the Wodonga and Douglas Mawson experiences.

Networking2000 occurred in November and some managers had registrations for this online conference. They found it very difficult to set aside the time needed to

follow the relevant threads of discussion at this conference. The overwhelming reflection from the managers was that they would have got more out of a conventional conference that they could attend, as they would have set aside the time physically!

November is a very busy time for all staff, no less the managers. I found that only one or two managers were available for a final meeting to discuss and evaluate the learning in the LearnScope project. To gather comments more broadly, I emailed the LeadScopers, as we named the team, asking them to give me feedback on skills developed, difficulties encountered and flexible learning strategies for 2001 in their various workgroups. I still found their response rate disappointing. It was the same participants throughout the project that participated regularly.

So, what changes happened as a result of the WBL?

Changes

1. Outcomes achieved and skills developed

The following technical skills were mastered by some of the explorers:

- use of an online forum
- informal and formal online chat with each other and with an educational mentor
- competence in using the Web CT platform for online learning
- internet awareness and browser use
- awareness of TAFESA online training options
- awareness of student management online and management of online assessment.

The following educational considerations took place on the journey.

Observing the features of the Virtual Learning Environment

With a variety of online modules to study, both positive and negative features of the VLE were experienced and debated.

Engaging students in online learning, motivating and sustaining students online

Some managers were totally engaged as online learners while others less so - some criticised the medium because they were confronted by technology glitches and others simply did not devote enough personal time to their learning tasks.

Providing skills readiness

The managers' computing skills were audited before they enrolled in their online modules - this allowed the facilitator to suggest appropriate online modules for study.

Understanding of access and equity issues in online delivery and understanding of online facilitation

Understanding of human resource management in an online environment

The Victorian Workplace Consultative Committee allows teacher time to be more flexible - we agreed to keep talking to Chris Horton about this point.

Environment

Understanding of physical resource management online

The managers were acutely aware of the need to manage physical resources, as they experienced much of their frustrations in this area. To have adequate equipment both at home and work was discussed, as it meant the difference between starting the expedition or not leaving Base Camp. The software issues to support enrolment and assessment, and the whole Student Management process in the online environment, were found to be inadequate.

2.0 Who did what and how well

This WBL project was a team learning project and so not all of the team had to learn the same amounts or even the same skills or the same concepts. The underpinning philosophy is that the total learning of the whole team is more valuable than the whole team learning everything! Of course, the participants began at different stages of their journeys to understand better the implications for managing learning online, and so their ends are also different. I believe that the WBL model met with varied success – some thought it was great and others articulated that it was a waste of time.

I also believe that it has raised the awareness of the strategic and operational issues surrounding online learning in our organisation and so it has acted as a change agent.

3.0 Leading to success in a changing world

Embedding strategies for ongoing development of Flexible Delivery/Learning in DMI strategic planning.

As a result of the LearnScope project, a Managers Communication Hub in the FLeET Website was established and it will be a key feature in the professional development strategy for managers at DMI in 2001.

As a result of their experiences and the experiences of others, the Internet site of DMI has become a priority and will be redeveloped in 2001.

Managers agreed to the continuation of an institute-based Flexible Learning Coordinator, whose role it will be to support and guide workgroups in their transition from traditional classroom delivery to a more flexible delivery.

The managers' team also agreed to support mentoring of other staff in WEBCT, seek out strategic links with external educational bodies in the design and delivery of online training, and put e-learning on the agendas of all the workteam meetings across the Institute.

4.0 Critical factors affecting the WBL project

- *Frequent communication* - both face-to-face and online, is essential to keep in touch with the participants and maintain a sense of belonging and remind them of the need to spend time on the project.

- *Keeping a sense of fun* - by invoking the 'Douglas Mawson Explorer' analogy.

- *The Learning Circles* - or 'Base Camps' as we named them, gave participants support from peers and a smaller forum to discuss the more important educational issues.

- *An experienced facilitator* - who recognised potential pitfalls and had strategies to overcome them.

- *Simulating a real experience* - ie let the participants experience the frustrations as well as the highlights of online learning.

- *Making the learning relevant* - to the managers in content and in the workplace.

5.0 Greatest challenges faced by the WBL project

- *The size of the team* - 35 participants is too many. Even though we had two facilitators and we devolved the larger team into smaller learning circles, the initial introduction to the larger group lessened the participants' ownership of and commitment to the learning.

- *Building the commitment of the participants* - the face-to-face meetings were scheduled as part of a regular meeting time. This reduced the sense of value and importance of the learning as it was listed on the agenda, and was sometimes shifted or juggled around other 'more important' items of discussion. On reflection, a separate time needed to be negotiated at the outset of the project.

- *Lack of content knowledge by the project manager and facilitator* - Enrolling participants in their online courses was extremely challenging as there are not a lot of courses being facilitated, and even with the ones that are, they do not have online enrolment. The difficulties that many keen managers experienced in the early stages of the project put them off. As they say: 'first impressions count'! Poor enrolment procedures reduced momentum in the project, even though we drew valuable learning from this experience.

- *Time management and maintaining motivation* – the managers experienced the challenges of disciplining themselves to study online in the work environment. This was one of the most frequent reflections on the learning.

- *Encouraging the managers to use the online communication tools* - especially the Bulletin Board. This is one area that professional development at DMI is going to take up in 2001, and continue to explore ways to involve managers in discussing strategic issues in this forum. The chat was more successful, as

we set aside a separate time for this and the time was finite.

- *Online learning vs core business* – In November, few managers were able to reflect on their learning as they were involved in planning for next year in their workgroups.

6.0 Benefit of a WBL project to DMI

The main benefit for the organisation was that the 'e' in education gained a whole new meaning for the managers at DMI. For better or for worse, the managers learnt first-hand what it is to be involved in e-learning. All of the managers, no matter what level of online skills they began the project with, have now moved slightly along the learning continuum. The managers have an insight into the opportunities and challenges of online learning. From the LearnScope project there has been a commitment to continue to learn in the new environment, and support strategies to help workgroups make the transition to e-learning, as appropriate.

Another benefit to the organisation is the raised awareness of the importance of WBL projects, and especially LearnScope, as an effective professional development strategy. Douglas Mawson Institute will certainly aim to build on the learning of this year and gain new funding in 2001.

Conclusion

From my experiences with the managers' LearnScope project and other WBL projects, I conclude that WBL does enable practitioners to be researchers – exploring new frontiers in the workplace. The Work-based Learning Model allows for a large number of participants to be involved in the research, allows for the collection of data by the facilitator, and provides time for reflection so that the research can be translated into new and/or better ways of doing business.

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